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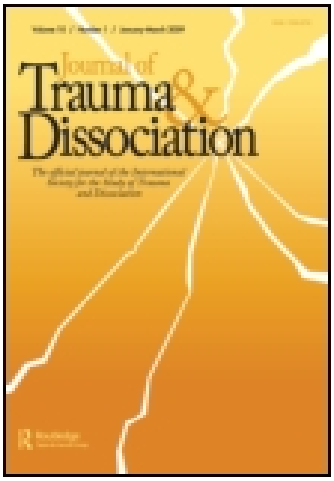

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Dissociation and Identity Transformation in Female Survivors of the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda: A Qualitative Research Study

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ARTICLES

Dissociation and Identity Transformation in Female Survivors of the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda: A Qualitative Research Study

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This qualitative research study deals with female survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. It examines dissociation and identity change in these women before, during, and after the genocide. Three theories were used to frame the findings. The 1st was assumptive world theory (R. Janoff-Bulman, 1992), which postulates that traumatic events may shatter people's everyday assumptions about the world. The 2nd was catastrophic dissociation theory (G. Boulanger, 2007), which refers to the gradual breakdown of the self as it repeatedly "experiences its psychic foundations in ways that do not happen in the average expectable life" (G. Boulanger, 2008, p. 646). The 3rd was structural dissociation theory (O. Van der Hart, E. R. S. Nijenhuis, & K. Steele, 2006), which postulates that when people encounter events that they cannot integrate into their mental lives, their personality may fragment and divide. The data were transcripts of interviews with 30 female genocide survivors. Data analysis revealed that these women experienced trauma-induced identity transformations. Before the genocide, they existed as a "Civilized Self,"

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with a stable identity in a secure, assumptive world. During the genocide, they existed as a "Survivor Self," the massive trauma of the genocide having disrupted their prior self-experience and identity. After the genocide, they existed as an "Aftermath Self," in which their Civilized and Survivor Selves coexisted in an unintegrated, dissociated form.

KEYWORDS trauma, dissociation, assumptive world, genocide, Rwanda

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The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda was one of the most intensive episodes of mass violence in human history. During a period of only 100 days, 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered. The genocide has also been described as a "gendercide," or "femicide," because rape was used as an instrument of war. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 Rwandan women of all ages were subject to sexual violence, including gang rape, sexual slavery, rape with weapons or sticks, mutilation of reproductive body parts, and intentional transmission of HIV/AIDS ("Shattered Lives," 1996). In the aftermath of the genocide, these women have been dealing with "overwhelming problems . . . including social stigmatization, poor physical and psychological health, unwanted pregnancy and poverty" ("Shattered Lives," 1996).

This study examines the transformative impact of gendercide on Rwandan women. Our approach begins with Herman's (1992) observation that survivors of wartime rape experience themselves as being "changed irrevocably" (p. 86). The woman's sense of self has been invaded and "systematically broken down" (p. 93). The result is a "contaminated identity" that is immersed in "shame, self-loathing, and failure" (p. 94).

In order to further develop Herman's insight, we used three other theoretical frameworks: assumptive world theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), catastrophic dissociation theory (Boulanger, 2007), and structural dissociation theory (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, & Steele, 2006). Assumptive world theory postulates that traumatic events violently disconfirm and shatter people's prior assumptions about the world and their confidence in "the absolutisms of everyday life" (Stolorow, 2007, p. 16), leaving them disoriented, fearful, and vulnerable. Catastrophic dissociation theory (Boulanger, 2007, 2008) extends this by observing that massive psychic trauma may result in a "collapse of the self" by disrupting the psychic functions that maintain ordinary experience. The survivor has the "subjective experience of having lost touch" with her former self, ultimately becoming "unfamiliar to herself" (Boulanger, 2007, p. 98). Also useful in understanding the psychic effects of massive trauma is structural dissociation theory (Van der Hart et al., 2006), which postulates that the personality may fragment and divide when people

are exposed to events so intensely negative and emotional that they cannot be integrated into their ongoing mental life.

Although it is known that wartime rape is intended to "destroy the identity of the victim" (Skjelsbaek, 2006, p. 375) along with her crucial social bonds (Amowitz et al., 2002), "very little" is known about what it is like "to be a victim of ethnically-based war rape" or how this experience might alter the victim's sense of self in the aftermath (p. 381). Furthermore, "little attempt has been made to deconstruct the actual process by which the adult self collapses" from severe traumatization (Boulanger, 2008, p. 643). The present study utilized the three theoretical frameworks mentioned previously to understand the process by which wartime rape affected women's sense of self and identity before, during, and after the genocide.

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METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative grounded theory methodology was utilized in this research for three reasons. First, pragmatically speaking, the research materials were interviews conducted with female survivors, and these naturally lent themselves to qualitative data analysis. Second, the qualitative methodology allowed us to focus on understanding the survivors' subjective experience as revealed in the interviews. Third, there are two different schools of grounded theory arising from a difference between its two founders, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After their work together, Glaser (1978) developed a coding method in which theory emerges from data, unconstrained by any prior theoretical assumptions. Strauss, in contrast, developed a method in which the investigator uses a broad theoretical framework as a guide throughout the coding and interpretation process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because our research used three theoretical frameworks, the Strauss method of grounded theory was used rather than an alternative method such as interpretive phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This choice allowed us to incorporate our theoretical frameworks into the data analysis.

Materials

The 30 interviews that were utilized for data analysis were provided to us by Foundation Rwanda, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization that works to support female survivors of the genocide and their children. The interviews were conducted in 2008 for the purposes of media documentation; therefore, we did not provide input into the development of the interview pro forma. The interviews asked 12 open-ended questions that took the survivors through a narrative account of their genocide experience. The beginning questions asked about the survivors' lives before the genocide,

the middle questions asked about the survivors' experiences during the genocide, and the final questions asked about the survivors' present lives. We note that the interview questions did not explicitly ask about identity but that the survivors brought the topic up spontaneously. In our view, this indicates the importance of identity to them. The participants were interviewed in their native language, Kinyarwanda, through interpreters at their Rwandan homes or at nearby survivor support centers, through which Foundation Rwanda gained access to many of their participants. A complete list of the questions may be obtained from us on request.

Participants

Thirty Rwandan females who survived wartime rape provided detailed descriptions of their genocidal experiences to Foundation Rwanda. The participants' ages ranged from 26 to 46, with a mean age of 32.8 years. At the time of the 1994 genocide, 56% of participants were 17 or younger and 30% of participants were the sole survivor of their entire immediate families. Despite the traditional role expectation of marriage in Rwandan society pre-genocide, 63% of participants remained unmarried post-genocide. Moreover, 100% of participants bore at least one child resulting from wartime rape; 70% of these children did not know that they were born from wartime rape, nor did they know the whereabouts of their biological fathers. A total of 40% of participants reported that they were HIV positive as a result of their wartime rape. In addition, 53% of participants reported that they participated in female survivors' groups and found them to be helpful. Finally, 33% of participants revealed that their Foundation Rwanda interviews were the first time they had ever spoken about their experience of wartime rape.

Data Analysis

The goal of the data analysis was to understand the transformative impact of wartime rape endured by female survivors of the 1994 genocide, as revealed in their interviews. The specific procedure was based on a grounded theory methodology developed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) for exploring the relevance of theoretical frameworks to a given phenomenon. It involves developing a system of categories that organizes the content of the interview transcripts into repeating ideas, themes, and theoretical constructs. In the first step of the data analysis, the first author read the transcripts with the following research question in mind: How can the experience of the female survivors be understood in terms of trauma and dissociation theory? From this reading, three broad narrative phases emerged, which were organized by both of us according to assumptive world theory, catastrophic dissociation theory, and structural dissociation theory. Following this initial reading, the first author began to underline text that bore on these three phases

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(relevant text). Then the relevant text was reviewed in order to develop ideas expressed by more than one participant (repeating ideas). Similar repeating ideas were then organized into themes. These themes typically included more than one repeating idea, although occasionally we judged one idea to be sufficiently important to be a theme in its own right. The themes were in turn grouped into theoretical constructs, formulated so as to be consistent with our three theoretical frameworks. To ensure the reliability of the coding, the first author did the coding independently, after which the second author reviewed the results, and then together we came to a consensus on the final coding. It should be noted that the coding process involved a hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1994), in which the results of each step were used to revise the results of the previous steps until a coherent picture emerged. As the final step of the data analysis, the theoretical constructs were organized into a theoretical narrative that told the story of the participants' transformative identity experience before, during, and after the genocide.

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RESULTS

The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 1, which displays the 16 repeating ideas, eight themes, and three theoretical constructs derived from the interviews. These constructs were then used to form a theoretical narrative (see the Discussion) describing the women's sense of self before, during, and after the genocide. Theoretical constructs are indicated in italicized, underlined text. Themes are indicated in italicized text. Repeating ideas are indicated in quotation marks. The ratios (*x*/*y*) report the proportion of research participants who endorsed each repeating idea. Percentages (%) represent the percentage of participants endorsing each theme. This section describes the themes. The repeating ideas that define the themes are given in Table 1.

I. *Civilized Self* (Pre-Genocide)

Theme 1. Expected Order of Life Events (i.e., Marriage Then Children; 37%). More than a third (37%) of participants began their narrative by describing the sequential order of life events that had been the norm before genocide. As part of a traditional society, the Rwandan women expected to live at home with their parents and siblings until a proper suitor made an introduction and proposed marriage.

Theme 2. Family and Community Belonging (53%). More than half (53%) of the research participants defined their pre-genocide life in terms of belonging to a tight-knit, elaborate family system: "We had a distant family of relations of not less than around 100 people and we all settled in the same village around the same hill."

TABLE 1 Theoretical Constructs, Themes, and Repeating Ideas

I. *Civilized Self*

Expected Order of Life Events (i.e., Marriage Then Children; 37%)

1. "I was just a girl, not married." (5/30)
2. "Before genocide I was married. I had a husband. We lived happily . . . I had just got married and [then] we had just got one kid." (6/30)

Family and Community Belonging (53%)

1. "Right before genocide in our village all people were friendly." (2/30)
2. "We were thirteen in my family, father and mother, seven boys and three other girls. I was the fifth born." (9/30)
3. "We had family networks, there were structures of support . . . the villages had extended lineages so if you had a problem, you had people to come to your rescue. If you had something to celebrate, you had people to celebrate with you. It was a functional community before genocide." (5/30)

Multiple Roles and Functions (37%)

1. "My father was a director and my mother was a nurse . . . so it was a routine of life of what I may call a middle class family today. Mother, father working, children going to school, that was the life. Once in a while, going out to have fun." (3/30)
2. "My family was not a very rich family we depended on agriculture. My parents, my father and mother did farm. They provided food and school fees for us and we were able to go to school." (6/30)
3. "I finished post primary and then I went to study auto mechanics. I was a mechanic actually . . . my husband we loved each other. He was also, he had trained in auto mechanics and we agreed since we were doing the same job one of should continue and the other stays home to look after children." (2/30)

II. *Survivor Self*

Assumptive World Shattered (100%)

1. "My fiancé was killed. The man that killed my fiancé is actually the one who came to say he was going to protect me." (22/30)
2. "We went in a church nearby because we thought that the church was safe. All my family were killed in that church except myself." (8/30)

Severe, Continual Trauma and Unimaginable Acts of Survival (100%)

1. "They raped us for about a month. From April through May, up to the end of May. They come, they take you, they do what they want to do with you—that was sex. When they finished, they killed some, they left some, some couldn't walk—it was havoc in this village." (30/30)
2. "They thought maybe I was dead, but at night, I don't know how . . . I started getting dead bodies off myself . . . and managed to get up from the mass grave to the ground again." (30/30)

Reduction to One Ethnic Label (100%)

1. "They killed people, they killed, they killed whoever they could immediately see that he's a Tutsi." (30/30)

III. *Aftermath Self*

Unable to Return to Civilized Self (100%)

1. "These children distorted my life. The experience of rape distorted my ambitions. Now I am called a woman but I am not married to any man. I would have been something, someone. But I can't be that. I'm a woman but I don't have a husband." (30/30)

Isolated and Unsupported (100%)

1. "I am alone. I don't have any surviving relative apart from my old mother. From his family [son's biological father], they are all there. But they don't accept he is their son. They don't care about him." (22/30)
2. "I don't talk about my feelings. But in me I have heartache, bitterness, anger that I have no one to express to. I have managed to always suppress and live with it." (8/30)

Notes: Figures in parentheses represent either the percentage or ratio of participants who identified this theme or idea.

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Theme 3. Multiple Roles and Functions (37%). More than a third (37%) of participants spoke of the multiple ways in which they related to their pre-genocide world. They were not just a Tutsi but rather a woman, mother, daughter, sister, worker, student, Rwandan.

II. *Survivor Self* (During the Genocide)

Theme 4. Assumptive World Shattered (100%). As the genocide spread across the country, these Rwandan women (100%) found themselves in another world, one in which pre-genocide norms and assumptions were no longer reliable. The participants described two main assumptions that were shattered during the genocide. The first involved family and community relationships. When threatened with the first incidents of violence in early April 1994, the women initially thought that they could count on these familiar relationships for safety. The second shattered assumption involved another common path to refuge: church. During the genocide, many Rwandans assumed that they would be safe if they took shelter in a Catholic church, as no one would dare to harm them there, but that was not the case.

Theme 5. Severe, Continual Trauma and Unimaginable Acts of Survival (100%). These Rwandan women (100%) endured not only one incident of rape but in most cases multiple incidents, typically in the form of sexual slavery in which they were held in captivity for long periods. The Rwandan women endured multiple sexual assaults, murder attempts, and the loss of entire families and communities over many consecutive months. Given that one seventh of the entire Rwandan population was killed in the early 1990s, these women survived against incredible odds.

Theme 6, Reduction to One Ethnic Label (100%). All participants (100%) described how they were viewed by others in terms of just their Tutsi identity during genocide. Other descriptors, such as former classmate, girlfriend, pregnant woman, devoted Christian, and sister-in-law, disappeared. As one woman told it,

> Earlier before genocide I had a boyfriend, but he was Hutu. So I went and knocked at his door asking them to open for me. He opened the door, but his relatives, his parents, said send the cockroach away. We don't need the cockroach in the house.

III. *Aftermath Self* (After the Genocide)

Theme 7. Unable to Return to Civilized Self (100%). Once the genocide ended, these Rwandan women (100%) told us how they tried to return to their former, pre-genocide worlds but were unable to do so. One woman described in great detail what she lost and how those losses define her daily existence post-genocide:

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> I lost; I thought I had lost all life. I had lost virginity. I had lost my education . . . So when I looked at what had happened to me I thought there was no future . . . Now after the war many came and some men, and men that I would have loved, each one was telling me they wanted to be my husband. Now that hurt me (even) more because I knew I was no longer a girl to be someone's wife.

Theme 8. Isolated and Unsupported (100%). The participants in this study described an experience of being alone and without support in their post-genocidal world. These women directly associated their current isolation and hardships to their genocidal rapes, resultant pregnancies, and HIV infections. The participants also reported that, at the time of these interviews, they had not sought any emotional support in managing their genocidal rape experiences. They shared how their silence and disconnection placed a burden on them: "The challenge that I have is that I am alone with my problems, I do not share with anyone what I go through. It's me and my son. For me that it is the biggest challenge."

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DISCUSSION

Theoretical Narrative

The aim of the present study was to understand the experience of female survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in terms of three theoretical frameworks: assumptive world theory, catastrophic dissociation theory, and structural dissociation theory. These approaches were used to develop theoretical constructs that describe three stages of the survivors' experiences before, during, and after the genocide, namely *Civilized Self, Survivor Self,* and *Aftermath Self*.

The first, pre-genocide stage is the *Civilized Self*. This stage describes the women's assumptive world prior to the genocide. This world was a relatively safe and secure place with a set of norms typical of a traditional collectivist society. Participants identified themselves as young girls or married women whose assumptive world was marked by an *Expected Order of Life Events (i.e., Marriage Then Children; Theme 1),* as well as a vast network of *Family and Community Belonging (Theme 2).* The latter element included a large immediate family, extended family lineages, and interactional and interdependent community members that related to one another via *Multiple Roles and Functions (Theme 3).*

Soon after the genocide began, the Rwandan females shifted from the *Civilized Self* into the second phase, the *Survivor Self*. This phase is well described by assumptive world theory and catastrophic dissociation theory. For the Rwandan females, the *Survivor Self* emerged after *Severe, Continual Trauma and Unimaginable Acts of Survival (Theme 5),* including multiple

rapes, loss of loved ones, and severe torture and violence. The Rwandan women had initially relied on their assumptive world to cope, turning to family and community connections and the church for safety. They soon realized that these assumptions no longer existed, that their *Assumptive World Had Been Shattered (Theme 4)* by genocide. The emergence of their *Survivor Self* helped these women stay alive by protecting their *Civilized Self* from the terror of *Severe, Continual Trauma* by performing *Unimaginable Acts of Survival (Theme 5),* an experience that corresponds to Boulanger's (2007) catastrophic dissociation. When the women were branded and hunted for being a Tutsi "cockroach" and *Reduced to One Ethnic Label (Theme 6),* survival became the only operational mode of functioning. Their nuanced, subjective experience no longer existed; they were reduced to dehumanized objects.

After the genocide, the women experienced themselves as an *Aftermath Self.* This phase of the post-genocidal self is well described by structural dissociation theory. Because of what they had suffered during the genocide, the women found themselves *Unable to Return to Their Civilized Selves (Theme 7).* They were often ostracized by society and/or withdrew from society, becoming *Isolated and Unsupported (Theme 8)* as they raised their children on their own. This contributed to a complex post-traumatic experience that included emotional distress, a physical sense of danger, chronic medical ailments, unmet basic needs, an uncertain future, and isolation from an indifferent world. To help reduce these problems, the participants provided some idea for possible interventions: support groups, access to specialized medical treatment, employment opportunities, education for their children, and recognition of their suffering and survival (local/international).

Limitations

The design of this study, particularly the fact that the interviews were conducted by Foundation Rwanda for media rather than research purposes, resulted in four important limitations. First, we were not involved in the sample selection process. This means that we do not know how representative these women are of the entire population of female survivors, which limits the generalizability of our conclusions. Second, the interview questions were not developed for research purposes, the result of which is that we lacked some demographic information about the participants. Third, we did not ourselves interview the participants, with the result that questions relevant to dissociation and identity were not directly asked. Fourth, we were not able to do member checks (Meadows & Morse, 2001), which entails the sharing of results with the original participants to see whether their experience was accurately reflected. We note, however, that while the second author was working on a different project, he informally shared the results with

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members of several different Rwandan survivor organizations, who found the results applicable to their own experiences.

Clinical Implications

These results have at least two important clinical implications. One is that the information provided about this population clearly identifies both the women and their children as a population at risk. If Rwandan society does not address their needs, mental health and otherwise, they are likely to become a permanently marginalized subpopulation of Rwandan society. At a more general level, clinicians working with patients who have experienced genocide or other severe, prolonged traumas might benefit from applying the Civilized–Survival–Aftermath Self model. The model would help clinicians more fully conceptualize these cases as well as provide psychoeducation to their patients that would help normalize their experiences, especially their struggle to return to their former, familiar selves.

Future Research

The results of this study should be followed up both theoretically and clinically. Theoretically speaking, it seems important to elaborate and develop the model suggested by the data. This can be done by doing more focused qualitative interviews with more precisely defined samples from this population, as well as other traumatized populations. It is important to note, however, that this is not an easy group to study, so that what is desirable in principle may not be feasible. In any event, the qualitative interviews could be supplemented by quantitative measures in a mixed methods design (Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

In terms of further clinical studies, we again point out how much the present study has identified a population at risk. We draw attention to "the 1995" children, the children born of genocidal rape. Some of the participants said that "we love each other . . . we are friends" in describing their relationship with their child, whereas others said more ambivalently "I don't hate my son. I don't love him either." It would be beneficial to interview these children and their mothers to better understand their experiences and perceptions and to develop possible treatment models specific to their needs. This research is currently being planned.

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